

# Classroom Leadership

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## How Schools Improve

### Rethinking School Reform

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As a young teacher, I was ambivalent about school reform. It seemed more an intellectual exercise than a practical way to change learning and teaching. I believed that professional development experiences would, at most, give teachers a technique or two to use in the classroom, but they would not result in *whole* school change in a lasting and visible way. It wasn't until the 2003–04 school year that I, now an assistant principal, discovered that change *could* happen in meaningful ways for an entire school.



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### Taking Heed, Taking Action

In July 2003, our Blue Ribbon middle school fell into warning status when our 8th grade special education students failed to meet No Child Left Behind (NCLB) target percentages in reading and math. By July 2004, however, we were back on track. The number of special education students who ranked at the advanced or proficient level in math rose from 17 to 36 percent. In reading, students who scored at the advanced or proficient level rose from 30 to 59, exceeding the NCLB targets set by our state.

What did we do and how did we do it? We started by involving all members of the educational community, including parents and students, in the effort to boost achievement. We convened a learning team, with the assistant principals, the principal, guidance counselors, department chairs in math and reading, a special education teacher, and a writing resource teacher as members. We charged the team with reviewing school data and recommending ways to increase achievement. We then took the following steps to address the needs of students who were not proficient:

**Step 1: Build greater awareness.** Some teachers did not understand their role in helping prepare students for the annual Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA), a standards-based, criterion-referenced assessment used to measure a student's attainment of the state's academic standards. Indeed, many teachers had never seen the test. So we gathered the staff together for a presentation that outlined the goals set by NCLB and reiterated the need for *all* teachers to help students attain the skills required to do well on the test. The presentation helped change perceptions about who is responsible for helping promote student achievement in reading and math.

**Step 2: Integrate test-taking strategies into the curricula.** If we wanted students to be successful in completing the PSSA, we needed to give them opportunities to do PSSA-type activities in all of their classes. We asked teachers to create activities that modeled PSSA test items. In a family and consumer science class, for example, the teacher might adapt a cooking assignment so that, in format, it resembled a PSSA test item and also addressed the standards for reading, writing, speaking, and listening.

We received some criticism from students, parents, and teachers for this step. They felt we overly stressed the link between the test and learning activities. I believe we achieved balance, though, especially given that most students, some teachers, and almost all parents were unfamiliar with the test before we started our interventions.

**Step 3: Address students with special needs.** We knew we had to address the needs of special education students who were not proficient. We started by assigning math and reading teachers to special education classes. We then analyzed test data for each 8th grade student with an IEP and identified their learning needs in reading and math. We were then free to tackle a difficult conundrum: How do you give additional instruction to a group of students when you have no additional staff, time, or space?

The initial solution to our problem involved looking at what was being taught in the students' current classes. Almost all IEP students take a course called Study Support, in which they receive assistance with assignments and homework and get help on tests. We decided to reorganize how this time was used and assigned students to small math and reading tutorial sessions led by the Study Support teachers.

We also considered the environment in which the students would take the PSSA. Our special education students were accustomed to having the special education teacher administer all their tests. So, instead of placing these students in a regular classroom for a high-stakes test, we asked the special education teacher to administer the PSSA to them. This step helped alleviate any undue anxiety our special education students may have experienced.

**Step 4: Involve the students and parents.** When we met with the student council to discuss the warning status, what the test meant, and what students might do to help, student council members determined that a schoolwide homework assignment would help convey the importance of the test for all students and their parents. It required students and parents to work together to answer a PSSA-type prompt, formatted like the actual test. We provided students with rubrics and instructions on how to use the rubrics to draft and evaluate their work. In school, teachers engaged the students in review activities to provide them with feedback on their performance. The assignments also provided teachers with valuable information about where to direct instruction to help students do well on the test.

**Step 5: Develop and administer practice tests.** Two months before the real test, we administered a practice test to every student in the school. We spent hours developing our own versions of practice tests using materials provided by the state, as well as our own curricular materials.

Once we administered the practice tests, a diverse group of teachers formed a scoring team to score the tests and provide feedback on the results to teachers and students. Scoring the tests—as mundane as it may sound—became a meaningful professional development activity. Teachers reported a deeper understanding of the test, the scoring rubrics, and the students' strengths and weaknesses. The experience was so valuable and created such collegiality that we plan to rotate all teachers into scoring sessions.

Our work continues, but I now think about school reform in a new way. The 2003–04 school year was an exciting time. Our reforms spoke to my deep beliefs about learning and teaching and about taking decisive action based on these beliefs. I realize now what a rare and wonderful thing it is to be involved in fundamental change that leads to higher student achievement.

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